



An Afghan soldier and US Marines with 1/3 marine Charlie Company take cover after being caught under Taliban sniper fire, in Trikhi Nawar, a poppy farmland area on the north-eastern outskirts of Marjah on Friday. Combined forces of 15,000 US, Nato and Afghan troops are facing stiff resistance in pockets of Helmand province where they are battling to eradicate Taliban fighters who have controlled the area with drug lords for years.

PHOTO: AFP

Dutch govt collapses over Afghan mission

AP, Amsterdam

The Dutch coalition government collapsed yesterday over whether to extend the country's military mission in Afghanistan, leaving uncertain the future of its 1,600 soldiers fighting there.

Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende announced that the second largest party in his three-party alliance is quitting, in a breakdown of trust in what had always been an uneasy partnership.

Balkenende made no mention of elections as he spoke to reporters after a 16-hour Cabinet meeting in The Hague that ended close to dawn. However, the resignation of the Labour Party which has demanded the country stick to a scheduled withdrawal from Afghanistan would leave his government with an unworkable majority, and political analysts said early elections appeared inevitable.

Balkenende said his centre-right Christian Democratic Alliance would continue in office together with the small Christian Union, and would "make available" Labour's cabinet seats. But he did not spell out his intentions.

The coalition, elected to a four-year term, marks its third year in office on Monday.

"Where there is no trust, it is difficult to work together. There is no road along which this

cabinet to go further," Balkenende said.

Dutch soldiers have been deployed since 2006 in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan on a two-year stint that was extended until next August.

Labour demanded that Dutch troops leave Uruzgan as scheduled. Balkenende's Christian Democratic Alliance wanted to keep a trimmed down military presence in the restive province, where 21 soldiers have been killed.

"A plan was agreed to when our soldiers went to Afghanistan," said Labor Party leader Wouter Bos. "Our partners in the government didn't want to stick to that plan, and on the basis of their refusal we have decided to resign from this government."

Nato recently sent a letter to the government asking if it would consider staying longer a move that the Western alliance normally would do only if it had a clear signal of agreement.

"The future of the mission of our soldiers in Afghanistan will now be in the hands of the new Cabinet," said Deputy Defence Minister Jack de Vries.

The split came after a buildup of tension over several weeks between Balkenende and Bos, the finance minister, mainly over Afghanistan and the government's earlier political support for the war in Iraq.

Most Britons for slashing immigration

ANI, London

An official UK government poll has revealed that the negative attitudes towards immigration were not softening in the country, as nearly eight out of 10 Brits want immigration to be slashed.

According to the Department of Communities and Local Government, 77 percent of people thought immigration should be cut.

More than half of respondents said they wanted immigration reduced by a great deal, and nearly a quarter of ethnic minorities said the number of immigrants coming to Britain should be cut.

The survey also found that students, better-paid workers and holders of degrees were far more favourable towards immigration than those further down the wage scale and people without qualifications, who often find themselves competing with migrant workers.

AFGHAN ASSAULT

Taliban put up tough fight

AFP, Outskirts Of Marjah

Taliban fighters under siege in southern Afghanistan were putting up a tough fight Saturday, military officials said, as civilian authorities geared up to take over.

The number of foreign troops killed in Operation Mushtarak to 12 with the death of an Isaf soldier during fighting Friday as Nato's biggest assault against the militants moved into its second week.

Some 15,000 US-led troops from Nato and Afghanistan are taking part in the offensive against Taliban militants who have held sway over the Marjah and Nad Ali districts of Helmand province for at least two years.

Operation Mushtarak is the showcase test of US President Barack Obama's new war strategy, which pivots on counter-insurgency and winning the confidence of local people.

Commanders said they expect the military phase of the operation to last another three weeks as they strive to clear the areas of snipers and innumerable hidden bombs left behind by fleeing fighters.

"We've been talking about Marjah for months and at no point did we say anything but it's going to be a tough fight," said US Marines Captain Abraham Sipe, spokesman at Taskforce Leatherneck in Helmand.

"There are pockets throughout the city where stiffer resistance has been met. But there was never any doubt there would be a significant IED threat," he said, referring to improvised explosive devices.

Of 22 foreign soldiers who died in Afghanistan in the past week, 12 were in Operation Mushtarak, said Isaf spokesman Sergeant Jeff Loftin.

One Afghan soldier has been killed, said Daud Ahmadi, Helmand provincial spokesman. Afghan troops account for almost one-third of the combined force in what has been billed by Nato as an "Afghan-led" operation.

Ahmadi also said that 15 civilians have been killed.

Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi denied reports the militants were using human shields, but took responsibility for the planting of IEDs -- the greatest threat to the advance and the biggest killer of foreign troops.

UN chief condemns Niger coup

Junta tightens grip

AFP, Niamey

UN chief Ban Ki-moon added his voice to international condemnation of a coup that toppled Niger's president, but in the capital Niamey thousands celebrated the end of Mamadou Tandja's rule.

"The secretary general condemns the coup d'etat that took place in Niger" and "appeals for calm and for the respect of the rule of law and of the human rights of all Nigerians," his office said in a statement issued Friday.

But thousands of people took to the streets to celebrate the coup and an opposition alliance called on people to show their support for the new junta in a rally in the capital Saturday.

Earlier Friday, Niger's new military rulers had lifted the curfew declared just hours after Thursday's coup, in which at least three soldiers died.

The African Union, whose leader Jean Ping had already condemned the takeover earlier in the day, announced it was suspending Niger from its ranks Friday.

"We have condemned the coup and imposed sanctions on Niger. Niger is suspended from all activities of the AU," said Mull Sebujja Katende, who presides over the African Union's peace and security council.



Moroccan volunteers of the 'Medina' help rescue workers to look for survivors and bodies after the minaret of a mosque collapsed during Juma prayers in Morocco's central town of Meknes on Friday killing 41 people and injuring 71 others. The collapse came after "heavy rains which lashed the region for several days," a television report said.

PHOTO: AFP



Kurdish wave flags of northern Iraq's Kurdish region during an election campaign rally in the ethnically-mixed Iraqi city of Kirkuk, 255km north of Baghdad yesterday. The president of Iraq's Kurdish regional government, Massud Barzani, called earlier this month on Kurds to head to the polls in large numbers on March 7 to cast their votes in the "crucial" general elections.

PHOTO: AFP

Sunni party drops out of Iraq election

AP, AFP, Baghdad/ Sulaimaniyah

The Sunni wing of Iraq's leading nonsectarian political coalition is dropping out of next month's elections, saying the vote will be illegitimate because of a Shia-ordered ballot purge of hundreds of candidates.

A statement Saturday by the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue stopped short of urging Sunnis to boycott the March 7 parliamentary elections.

But it invited other political parties to withdraw. At least one, the National Council for Tribes of Iraq, said it would.

The Front for a National Dialogue is headed by Sunni lawmaker Saleh al-Mutlaq.

He was barred from running for re-election after a Shia vetting panel accused him of having ties to Saddam Hussein's outlawed Baath party. Al-Mutlaq has said he quit the party in the 1970s.

Earlier electoral authorities on Friday imposed a curfew on campaigning in a northern Iraqi province that has become a fierce battleground for Kurdish votes ahead of the country's general election.

US negotiating with allies on Iran sanctions

Rafsanjani brands IAEA report biased

ANI, AFP, Washington/ Tehran

The United States is negotiating with Russia, Great Britain, France and Germany on a package of sanctions that it plans to impose on Iran for its nuclear activity.

According to Fox News, Washington will later present this package to China said to be the least enthusiastic member of the Security Council where Iran sanctions are concerned.

The White House has begun circulating sanctions against Iran as part of its pursuit of United Nations-backed punishment for Iran's secretive pursuit of nuclear weapons, Fox News has learned.

Washington is not pushing for a formal take-it-or-leave-it list of sanctions, but choosing a consensus approach where Iran sanctions are concerned.

Meanwhile, powerful Iranian cleric and former two-time president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani lashed out at UN nuclear watchdog yesterday for presenting what he said was a biased report against Tehran.

"It is clearly evident that a part of this report has been presented following recommendation and under the influence of foreign elements," Rafsanjani said, referring to Thursday's release of a report by the UN body expressing "concerns" that Tehran could be developing a nuclear warhead.

PM for liberal society

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writers and other intellectuals to further advance Bangla language and literature in the world arena through their united work.

The prime minister made the call while addressing the award-giving ceremony of Ekushey Padak 2010 at the city's Osmani Auditorium in the morning.

She informed the function that her government has already urged the United Nations to recognise Bangla as one of its official languages to further glorify the supreme sacrifice and contribution of the language-movement heroes.

The prime minister announced the government's latest step to compile the chronicles of events of the 1952 Language Movement and officially submit the compilation to the United Nations to project in detail the glories of the language movement.

"We will compile the history of our great language movement and send those to the United Nations for projecting the glorious history," she said, hoping that this will help in recognising the Bengali language as one of UN's official languages.

The distinguished personalities who received the prestigious Ekushey Padak 2010 are Dr Golam Mousa (language movement-posthumous), poet Mohammad Rafique (literature), Sayeed Ahmad (literature-playwright, posthumous), Helena Khan (literature), Dr Muntasir Mamun (research), ASHK Sadek (social personality, posthumous), Sangharaj Jyotipal Mahathero (social personality, posthumous), AKM Hanif alias Hanif Sangket (social personality), Partha Pratim Majumder (mime artist), Nasir Uddin Yusuf Bacchu (theatre), AKM Abdur Rauf (fine arts-posthumous), Imdad Hossain

(fine arts), Ahmed Imtiaz Bulbul (lyricist-music), Laila Hasan (artist-dance) and Mohammad Alam (photojournalist-posthumous).

Sheikh Hasina handed over the award that carries a medal, a certificate and cheque for Tk 1 lakh to each of the award winners or to their successors at the function.

The awarding ceremony started with the playing of the National Anthem, which was followed by recitations from the holy Quran, Geeta, Bible and Tripitok as conventional rituals of state functions.

With Information Minister Abul Kalam Azad in the chair, the function was also addressed by State Minister for Cultural Affairs Promod Mankin. Cabinet Secretary M Abdul Aziz moderated the programme, which was attended by ministers, advisers to the prime minister, Judges, MPs, diplomats and representatives of donor agencies and foreign missions.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her address paid rich tributes to Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and all language martyrs, including Barkat, Jabbar, Rafique and Salam.

She expressed the hope that the non-communal spirit of the Bengali nation would continue to defeat the evils like militancy and extremism.

"Ekush (21st February) is the source of our existence. It is the carter of Bangalee nationalism, secularism and non-communal spirit. Evil forces will never be able to erase the non-communal tradition and culture from the hearts of the people as Ekush will remain ever-alive in our hearts," she said.

"We are such a rare nation in the world which sacrificed lives to uphold dignity of its mother tongue. Through the path of

language movement, we also attained independence by defeating a mighty force. Now our government's mission is to turn Bangladesh into a technology-based modern country."

She said history and spirit of the language movement can inspire every citizen of the country to achieve its development targets.

Hasina observed that 21st February is no longer an auspicious occasion only for the Bengali nation--now people of all languages observe the day as the International Mother Language Day.

"The 21st February is now the symbol of realising the rights of all to their mother languages, particularly for the minority ethnic groups."

She said that through the establishment of International Mother Language Institute in Dhaka, the Bengali nation has the great responsibility of protecting all mother languages of the world.

"Now it is our great duty to save all mother languages in the globe. We can do this through continuous research. And we must be successful in doing this onerous task."

BSS adds: Bangladesh Photo Journalists Association (BPJA) yesterday expressed gratitude to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her government for awarding Ekushey Padak to its founder member late Mohammad Alam for his contribution to journalism.

The BPJA, in a statement, urged the government to continue the trend of giving the Ekushey Padak to the photojournalists.

The statement, signed by BPJA Office Secretary Shahadat Hossain, hoped that the government would extend all cooperation to the photojournalists in discharging their professional duties in future.

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